

Cuban Invasion:

3 in Kennedy Administration Review '61 Failure

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Three new accounts of the Bay of Pigs invasion, provided by former Kennedy Administration officials, agree that President Kennedy's political misgivings about the project materially reduced whatever chances of success it had.

Two of these accounts, by Theodore C. Sorensen and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., also agree that the ill-fated invasion of Cuba never had much chance of success.

"How could everybody involved have thought such a plan would succeed?" Mr. Kennedy exclaimed after it was all over, according to Mr. Sorensen. "How could I have been so far off base? All my life I've known better than to depend on the experts. How could I have been so stupid, to let them go ahead?"

Mr. Sorensen and Mr. Schlesinger also agree that President Kennedy's decision to cancel a scheduled air strike on the morning of the invasion, April 17, 1961, probably was mistaken and unnecessary, but that it had little to do with the failure of the Cuban force.

The third account, however, by Richard M. Bissell Jr., suggests that the operation would have had "a damned good chance" had there been sufficient air support for the Cuban volunteers.

Parts of Forthcoming Books

Mr. Sorensen was Mr. Kennedy's special counsel in April, 1961, when the Cuban volunteer brigade was defeated and captured by Fidel Castro's forces after a three-day fight. Mr. Sorensen's version, a part of a book to be published next fall by Harper & Row, appeared in Look this week.

Mr. Schlesinger was a special assistant to the President in 1961. His account, also part of a forthcoming book, was published in Life this week. Yesterday The Washington Evening Star published a copyright interview with Mr. Bissell, who was in charge of planning the invasion for the Central Intelligence Agency.

Mr. Sorensen and Mr. Schlesinger make it plain that President Kennedy, finding the invasion plan well advanced when he took office, had grave misgivings about it and gave consideration to abandoning it. Ultimately, he felt he had no choice but to proceed within the limitations he had set.

U.S. Military Move Barred

The primary limitation was that there was to be no overt United States military participation.

This decision, Mr. Sorensen wrote, "led to other restrictions designed to make the operation more covert and our involvement more concealed, restrictions that in fact impaired the plan's military prospects."

Among other things, the decision sharply limited the amount of air support available to the invaders. They had to rely on outdated B-26 aircraft piloted by refugees and based in Nicaragua.

"Since [President Kennedy] was unwilling to conduct an overt operation through the Defense Department," Mr. Sorensen wrote, "he should have abandoned it altogether, as beyond the C.I.A.'s capability."

Restriction on Landing Site

Mr. Kennedy also made a political decision against attempting the landing at Trinidad, at the foot of the Escambray Mountains. That site had been selected by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, from alternatives presented by the C.I.A., as the most likely for success.

Mr. Sorensen wrote that Trinidad was "ruled out as being too conspicuous." Mr. Schlesinger wrote that Mr. Kennedy considered the proposed operation at Trinidad "too spectacular. . . he wanted a quiet landing, preferably at night."

The Joint Chiefs then named the Bay of Pigs as the best of the remaining alternatives. But it was separated by 80 miles of swamp from the Escambray Mountains, and thus it was impossible for the invaders to scatter into the mountains as guerrillas, as Mr. Kennedy had expected.

Both authors make it clear that this difficulty was never explained to the President. Mr. Sorensen wrote: "The vast majority of the [invaders] had not been given any guerrilla training." A guerrilla operation, he added, was "never a realistic alternative."

"It was never even planned by the C.I.A. officers in charge of the operation," he added, and they neither told the President that they thought this operation was out nor told the exiles that this was the President's plan.

Where Accounts Differ

Mr. Sorensen and Mr. Schlesinger differ sharply on one point about the shift in the invasion site.

Mr. Sorensen wrote that when the Joint Chiefs learned that Trinidad had been ruled out, "they selected the Bay of Pigs as the best of the alternative sites offered without informing either Kennedy or [Secretary of Defense] McNamara that they still thought Trinidad preferable."

Mr. Schlesinger, after writing that it was the President who ruled out Trinidad, said the Joint Chiefs agreed that the Bay of Pigs "seemed the best of the three alternatives, but added softly that they still preferred Trinidad."

A source involved in the decision said privately that his recollection was clear that the Joint Chiefs' continuing preference for Trinidad had been expressed in an official paper. He said he could not say whether this paper had gone to the President or had been closely studied by him.

Mr. Bissell was quoted in the interview as having said he believed that the invasion planners "can be criticized for allowing this chipping away to go on without insisting on the whole plan or on cancellation."

"Because we were so involved in seeing it go ahead," he said, is quoted as having said, "we did not insist on as great freedom of action as needed."

But the Sorensen and Schlesinger articles assert that the invasion plan had never had any realistic chance to succeed and that President Kennedy came to believe this after the event.

Wild Misjudgment

Assurances that the operation could succeed without United States military involvement, Mr. Sorensen wrote, were "a wild misjudgment." The project was "diplomatically unwise and militarily doomed from the outset. . . that so great a gap between concept and actuality should exist at so high a level on so dangerous a matter reflected a shocking number of errors in the whole decision-making process, errors that permitted bureaucratic momentum to govern instead of policy leadership."

For that reason, Mr. Sorensen wrote, "the whole project seemed to move mysteriously and inexorably toward execution without the President's being able either to obtain a firm grip on it or reverse it."

He said Mr. Kennedy, new in office, hesitated to overrule "renowned experts" who had the project well under way. He did not know these experts well,

failed to realize that the operation could not be kept covert in an "open society," and accepted the advice of "experts" over his own political doubts; the skepticism of some aides like Mr. Schlesinger and the open opposition of Senator J. W. Fulbright of Arkansas.

Mr. Schlesinger wrote that Mr. Kennedy never saw the written protest of Chester Bowles, then Under Secretary of State and now Ambassador to India. He said that he himself was advised by Robert F. Kennedy, then the Attorney General: "You may be right or you may be wrong, but the President has made his mind up. Don't push it any further."

How C.I.A. Viewed Operation

Mr. Sorensen said that the C.I.A. presented the plan to President Kennedy as a question "whether he was as willing as the Republicans to permit and assist these exiles to free their own island from dictatorship, or whether he was willing to liquidate well-laid preparations, leave Cuba free to subvert the hemisphere, disband an impatient army in training for nearly a year under miserable conditions, and have them spread the word that Kennedy had betrayed their attempt to depose Castro."

Mr. Bissell, who now lives and works in Hartford, Conn., raised another point in the Evening Star interview. [The exiles], he said, "were the most powerful military force between Mexico and Panama and it is entirely possible that they might have tried to seize a base in Nicaragua, Honduras or Guatemala; there is not the slightest doubt that they could have defeated any Guatemalan force."

There was no "final plan," he said, of how to dispose of this unit and "we did warn more than once that there would be a very difficult problem with this armed, highly motivated unit in case the operation were canceled."

Mr. Schlesinger's account of the pressures on Mr. Kennedy coincided substantially with Mr. Sorensen's. All three accounts picture an operation almost impossible to reverse once in motion.

Mr. Bissell appeared, however, to believe still that there had been a chance for success. He said there were two possibilities -- an established beachhead around the Bay of Pigs airstrip, which would have permitted the rebel air force to bomb Cuban military targets, and brought down the Castro